

Education and Democracy

Simon Schwartzman

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The seventies, for many countries in Latin America, were the years of transition from military to civil rule, and the eighties the years of consolidation of the new democratic regimes. The next challenge was to stabilize the economy, which in many cases led to economic stagnation and the reduction of the governments' ability to distribute resources and respond to the growing pressures for social and economic benefits. Now, in the nineties, the challenge is how to use the framework of stable democracies and currencies to make the Latin American societies more equitable, richer and more able to attend to the social needs of its population.

A good educational system is a central ingredient to meet this challenge. It allows for increasing productivity, better distribution of income, and more opportunities for everybody. It is also a crucial component in the stabilization and consolidation of democratic rule. In the following, I would like to address the question of the links between democracy and education, with reference to the different senses of the latter term.

One of the meanings of democracy is equity, and the association between equity and education is very strong. Without a good system of universal, basic education, no society can provide its citizens with equal opportunities for learning, working and participating in social life. The role of central governments in providing universal education is being questioned today, because of their inefficiencies and inability to tap local resources and initiative. The participation of local governments, non-governmental organizations and the private sector in the delivery of basic education is more important than ever, and school principals, teachers and parents should play a much more important role in the management of schools that is usually the case in the over-bureaucratized context of Latin American education. But, unhindered, these decentralization drives can increase the inequalities among regions, social and ethnic groups. Equal access to basic education is a public good, and this should be clear in our minds as we move from the centralized and bureaucratic structures of public education towards more flexible and participatory systems.

One could have equity without democracy, however, and in many cases, in fact, authoritarian governments have been more effective than democratic ones in promoting universal education. In this regard, one should remember the recurrent findings of political sociology, heralded by Seymour Martin Lipset years ago, of the strong and pervasive association between education and democratic values, and no education and

authoritarianism. To be educated means to understand better how the political system works, and to be able to benefit more from the opportunities and alternatives provided by an open and well established political system. Whenever an authoritarian regime is effective in providing basic universal education, it is also creating the seeds of its own demise by its newly educated citizens. Thus, public education is an essential ingredient of democratic citizenship, and cannot go very far in an authoritarian context.

The diffusion of democratic values is thus the second link between education and democracy. But how should this be done? Is it democratic to chose one or a few history books for all schools in a country, or should the choice of contents be left to the decision of principals, teachers, the student's families and the students themselves? These are very controversial issues, and I would not pretend to answer them here. I just want to stress that the links between pedagogical practices and democracy are far from obvious. The provision of a common core of historical, ethical and even religious information and values for all students is often presented as an essential ingredient in the process of nation building and citizen education, but it can have two serious drawbacks. The first is the loss of content and meaning, and ultimate demoralization, that takes place whenever personal and community values are transformed into state ideologies. The other is the destruction or repression of the culture, values and life styles of minority and less privileged social groups. The alternative, however, is not without its difficulties. A common language, and the mastery of a common set of information and skills, are essential if we want to obtain equal opportunities and social equity.

An associated meaning of democracy in education relates to the very practice of teaching in the classroom. Education in Latin American schools tend to be ritualized, bureaucratic, based on rote learning, and disconnected from the student's surrounding realities. The proposed alternative is to allow the students to construct their own path to learning, based on their own life experience and creativity. But, in societies with such high levels of inequality as the Latin Americans, good quality, centrally produced pedagogical materials are necessary to compensate for the inequalities in teacher skills, family backgrounds and local resources that differ widely among regions and social groups. "Creative" pedagogies can end up perpetuating inequalities, and leaving students without basic information and skills needed for their lives.

A final sense of democracy is the way education systems should be governed. What are the roles of national, state and local governments? What are the roles of teachers, and their associations? What about the parents, and the Church? The dilemmas, here, are similar to the ones on pedagogical alternatives: Too much central authority thwarts local initiative, favors bureaucratization and the waste of resources; too much decentralization and local autonomy increases inequality and opens the possibility of strengthening pockets of low quality, uncontrolled experiments in incompetent education. To this, I would just add that one should not mistake the democratic rule of educational institutions with the role education plays in the democratization of a country. Public universities in Latin America are often ruled according to very democratic standards of equal participation, but their effects on promoting social equity and fostering democratic values are at best doubtful.

These are difficult dilemmas that are not easily solved by simple-minded commitments to any one of their extremes. I would like to conclude with a simple statement. The best contribution education can give to democracy is to provide a basic set of skills and information to the population, assuring equal opportunities and skills which are valued in the labor market, and leading to a sense of participation in a common enterprise. This is a public good, and should be provided or supervised by public authorities. Given this paramount goals, the other issues - the contents of education, the pedagogy, matters of centralization and decentralization, participation and internal democracy of institutions - should be seen as instrumental to the larger goal. If we do this, we may have a better understanding of the alternative means that are available to our tasks, and work for this common goal without the hindrance of false and sectarian commitments.